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Review

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This passenger steamer named after Holland's founder, A.C. Van Raalte, was a familiar sight on Lake Michigan for 34 years until she was sold to owners in Wisconsin. This photo dates to 1888 when she was captained by A. C. Mayo and ran daily excursions from Muskegon Lake to Lake Michigan. Her name, A.C. Van Raalte, is barely visible on the pilot house. See story on page 4. (Photo courtesy of Lake Superior Marine Museum Association).

Nautical Namesakes of A. C. Van Raalte

by Geoffrey Reynolds

Little is known of the influence A. C. Van Raalte exerted on the maritime history of the Great Lakes other than that of his own frustrating efforts to open a channel and harbor in Black Lake in the community he founded in 1847. However, history records at least two vessels that plied the Great Lakes and bore his name for over 80 years.

The first of these, a small schooner, bearing the founder's name, did take hold in the area and thrive along the eastern Lake Michigan shoreline. Built in 1850 at Michigan City, Indiana, the *A.C. Van Raalte* schooner measured 44 feet, 12.5 feet wide and 4.5 feet deep, and weighed 50 tons, according to an 1855 U.S. Customs House inspection.

In June of 1859 the schooner was refitted and assigned to the Grand Traverse Bay and Grand Haven route for the season. She was described as a splendid, fast, sailing schooner "expressly for carrying families, with their furniture, provisions, cattle, etc." to run regularly between Grand Traverse Bay and Grand Haven during the season, touching at Traverse

City, Elk Rapids, Northport, Manistee and Muskegon along the way. During that season she shared in the emerging, but brisk maritime trade developing on the Great Lakes boasting 163 propeller and 40 sail vessels.

She continued on this route until the end of the shipping season and most likely remained in the Northport area for winter quarters. While this is hard to verify, chances are she was trapped as a result of a Northwester early in March which prevailed for several days, driving floating ice from the lower end of East Bay up to the land, and blockading all vessels and extending for several miles out into the bay.

Trapped in 16-inch ice, the schooner was crushed to pieces while under the command of Captain O. Evans. Soon after this event she was declared a total loss by the captain on behalf of her owners and removed from maritime registers. Local divers, despite intensive searches through the years, have, nevertheless, failed to yield evidence of her remains, just as no connection can be made between her name and that of her namesake.

The second vessel to carry the Holland founder's name was built to be a passenger steamer and finished her maritime service as a derelict raft tug 65 years later. The *A. C. Van Raalte* steamer began her career after being commissioned to be built at the shipyard of Hitchcock & Gibson of Buffalo, New York by J.T. Edwards of St. Joseph, Michigan. On a Tuesday evening, November 12, 1867, the hull of this *Van Raalte* slowly slipped into the water. Once there, her upper works were added and measured 96.4 feet in length, 23 feet wide, and 8.6 feet in depth. She was equipped with a powerful 300 horse power steam engine manufactured in Marine City, Michigan. She was described by local papers as "a small but neat and rakish looking" vessel.

Once in the water and running, she made her way to St. Joseph to join three other steamers, *Burton*, *Skylark* and *St. Joseph*, owned by the Lake Michigan Transportation Company. There, beginning in March 1868, she made daily runs between St. Joseph and Chicago, interrupted only by creditors from the Third National Bank seeking back payments from her owner.

The following account of July 8, 1868 in the Holland newspaper *De Hope* describes her special visit to Holland on the occasion of Independence Day:



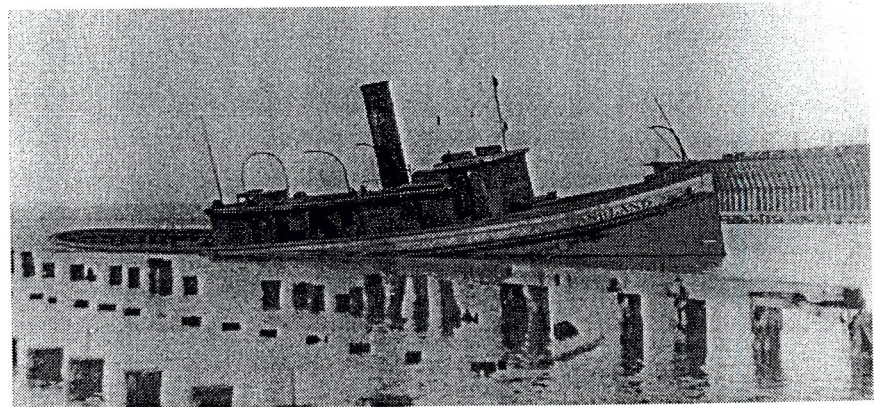
Arie Woltman, skipper of the *Van Raalte* in 1871 which ran between Holland and Chicago in the peach and passenger trade. Pictured here with wife Alice Lubbers.

The colors were formally presented on Saturday morning July 4 at the steamboat A.C. Van Raalte. Because Dr. V. R. was not present this was done by his son D.B.K. Van Raalte, after which speeches were made by Rev. P. J. Oggel and Dr. P. Phelps...The Van Raalte then departed for Grand Haven and it took a rather large amount of passengers who made a pleasure ride there and who returned that evening.

In April 1869, she was sold for \$12,618 to Lucy Green of New York City. News of her is scarce until March 1871 when she was listed as running between Holland and Chicago in the peach and passenger trade under the command of local sailor Arie Woltman. Woltman was a Holland marshal and later

Ottawa County Sheriff. Three months later she began her run between Grand Haven and Traverse City, plying the same route her predecessor had plied in 1859.

In April 1875, her owner and route were changed when she was purchased and retained by Captain Dodge of Detroit. Her 1875 schedule began with a route between Traverse City and Escanaba and was later changed to the Traverse City and Mackinaw route stopping at ports along the way. This route was shortened later in the spring of 1875 to stop at Petoskey in order for her to connect with passengers on steamers like the *Music* heading for Mackinaw, and rail passengers traveling via the *Grand Rapids & Indiana Railroad*.



The *Ashland*, the former *A. C. Van Raalte*, ending its days abandoned in the channel into Ashland, Wisconsin. (Photo courtesy of Milwaukee Public Library).

In 1878, the railroad contracted with her at \$75 a day to take passengers to Mackinaw. After the railroad reached Mackinaw City in 1882, her services were no longer needed for this route

and she was used for passenger service to Manistique to haul workers and material for the building of Mackinac Island's *Grand Hotel*. As railroads grew in popularity, there was a gradual reduction of small passenger trade vessels as the quicker safer trains began offering twelve month service to Mackinaw City.

In 1882 the Smith brothers of Cheboygan, Michigan purchased the *A. C. Van Raalte* for the northern Michigan routes. Ownership changed again in 1884 but her new owners followed the same route. In 1887 she was rebuilt. Subsequently, W. A. Snyder of Grand Haven, an ex-Mississippi river boat captain, came to Grand Haven in 1869 and purchased the ship. Before owning the *Van Raalte* he

spent his time as superintendent of the Grand Haven Tug Association, captain of the *Star Duluth*, and built the tug *Lizzie Frank*.

Other owners of the *A. C.*

Van Raalte included a partnership from Muskegon and several subsequent owners, all from Chicago. Her last owner, Charles R. Leihy of Bayfield, Wisconsin, sold her to the Milwaukee based Shroeder Lumber Company in 1902. There she was renamed the *Ashland* after the Wisconsin port city which would also become her final resting place.

As the *Ashland*, she served as a raft tug, pulling large log rafts called booms around the lakes to port city lumber mills. Once there, the logs were made into lumber for building homes and businesses in the west.

After more than six decades of service she was abandoned in 1931 in the channel leading into Ashland and eventually surrendered in 1937 and left to scavengers and eventual decay.

There is speculation that there was still another vessel, a paddlewheeler built in Traverse City in 1871, named after Van Raalte. Yet it remains a mystery to this day as to the link between Van Raalte himself and the boats or their owners. It would seem perhaps that the reverend was well known and respected beyond the borders of the kolonie he founded and was honored in this way by his admirers.

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Geoffrey Reynolds is Collections Archivist at the Joint Archives of Holland with an avid interest in the maritime history of the Great Lakes region.

Postscript

Ironically, while boats were being named after him, Van Raalte himself was frustrated by failed attempts at opening and securing a harbor for Holland. It took nearly 50 years to realize that dream. Here are excerpts from an 1857 passionate plea from the Dutch settlers in Holland to the U. S. Congress for assistance with efforts to create a secure harbor:

Honorable Gentlemen!-- We pray you give attention and your assistance in behalf of the weak. We, Hollanders adopted citizens of Michigan, come with a plain case, stated in but few words. It is again the Black Lake Harbor, in Michigan.

Ten years ago, we began to knock at your doors; since which time we have been constantly engaged in a life and death struggle in the wilderness and on a desolate shore, tantalized with an inefficient beginning of our harbor work, and cruelly kept in suspense. For the want of harbors, our vessels are wrecked, dear lives are lost, thousands of our countrymen, watching the result of our struggle and anxious to cast in their lot with us are kept back and our temporal welfare is undermined. And it is only the proverbial perseverance of the Dutchman, which keeps us

here or else the country would have been abandoned and turned again into a wilderness. As a mercantile, seafaring and manufacturing people, we can have no existence unless our Harbor is opened.

With all the force of the earnest souls of a grieved people, brought to extremities, we pray, let us not longer linger between heaven and earth; let us not longer die such a cruel, slow, but sure death. We pray for a decision.

We remain with the most sincere respect, Your obedient servants. December 1857.

In 1860 citizens took matters into their own hands and dug a channel from Black Lake to Lake Michigan. Finally, in 1867 the federal government took over improvement of the harbor.

Additional monies came in the 1870s but it was not until the turn of the century, nearly fifty years after the effort was begun, that the harbor was substantially completed.